

THE OPTIMISM OF THE DISMAL SCIENCE: GROWTH, ECONOMICS, AND THE NATURAL WORLD IN THE AMERICAN CENTURY

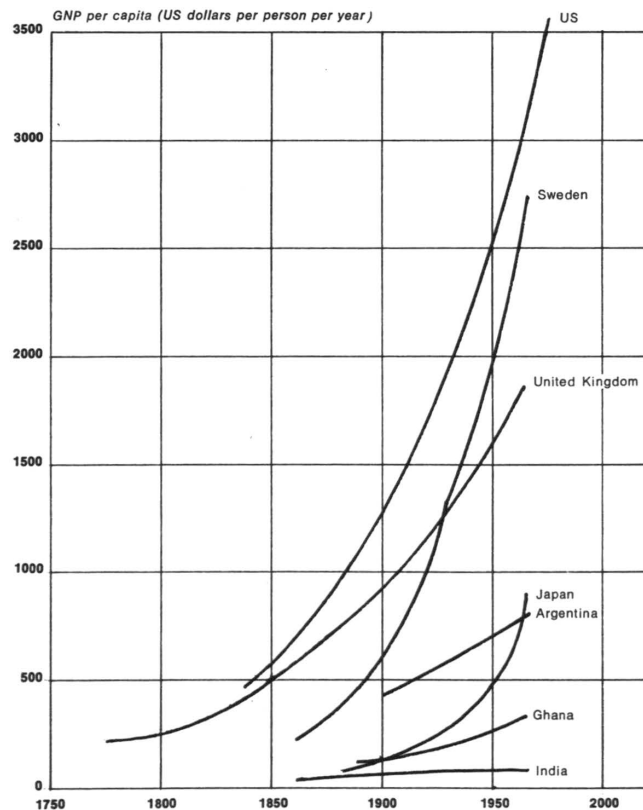
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2:30-4:30 PM

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E51 – Room 095

Figure 7 ECONOMIC GROWTH RATES



In 1956, a young MIT economist named Robert Solow published an article titled "A Contribution to the Theory of Economic Growth." Combined with his continued work on the topic over the next several decades, the paper helped him win the Nobel Prize in economics and gain recognition as the progenitor of growth theory. A brilliant theorist, gifted writer, and adored teacher,

Solow's contributions to economics are beyond question. Yet his growth theory, like much of postwar American economics, excluded the natural world from its calculations. The legacies of this disjuncture are still felt today, where contemporary political discussions are often framed as a conflict between economic growth and planetary protections, with the former almost always prioritized over the latter. To a historian, this is a curious state of affairs. Economists did not always exclude the environment, and my research seeks to trace the uneven and contingent process by which this occurred. In particular, my talk examines three episodes in this longer history: the methodological pluralism of pre-WWII American economics, the rise of growth theory in the 1950s and 1960s, and the response of economists to the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout, I seek to build on and extend discussions in environmental history on the interconnections between material and intellectual history, growth and sustainability, and economics and ecology.

This event is part of the MIT Seminar on Environmental and Agricultural History sponsored by the History Faculty and the Program in Science, Technology and Society. For more information contact kalopes@mit.edu